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Problems with Steve Pinker's Mentalese: On the Implications of Bilingualism

BY MARINO FERNANDES

Marino Fernandes wrote this piece under the mentorship of Dr. Catherine Womack and presented at NCUR 2005.

Introduction

I have different concepts I use depending on the language I am speaking. In Cape Verdean creole, there is the concept of *morabeza*—one that speaks of the culture's attitude toward all people. It teaches us to walk the street with an open heart, a smile and spirit to help the next man. As my father still tells me: "When you meet people remember to show them your *morabeza*, and you will see the relationship flourish smoothly." It is the idea of hospitality without expectation of return, without worry of one's own resources. It is also the spirit of *bonhomie*, of universal friendliness. This is an attitude that one takes, the way one conducts oneself—implicitly. Although this is the basic idea, we do not have a word in English that precisely mirrors it.

In this paper, I want to consider the claim that not all languages have the same power to express the meaning that the speaker intends. Examples like the one above give us an idea of the phenomenon; I will be looking at some other examples in detail later. I will argue that this is because there are concepts that are culture-specific in as much as language is a vehicle for the culture. To understand what I mean by culture-specific concepts, let us consider the Portuguese concept of *Saudade*. The best way to explain this idea is to synthesize the ideas of melancholy, nostalgia, homesickness, filial love, immigration and a spirit of longing for the sailors and explorers of the 15th century into a cluster of concepts. Although it can be explained to people so that a fairly close understanding is reached, there is something about that concept that is ineffable to persons unfamiliar with the Portuguese way of life. This long-winded grocery list would not be necessary were I giving this paper to a room full of my compatriots. It is something that is understood. To be Portuguese is to be well acquainted with this concept. This suggests that along with membership in a culture comes a package of concepts. Moreover, these

concepts are not shared cross-culturally. It has long been understood that language is a powerful tool for cultural conservation. Part of what it is to be a member of a given community is to speak the language in the ways that the members of that culture do. This suggests the idea that language is a vehicle for culture, especially with regard to such culturally rich and specific concepts like those I mentioned above.

The questions I have been shaping are as follows: Do the concepts we acquire depend on the culture we live in? Or does acquisition of *any* language guarantee that we have certain concepts? In *The Language Instinct*, Steve Pinker argues the latter. This position stems from linguistic nativism, which I will discuss below. In the end, I think we will see that Pinker's nativism seems to work well for most concepts; although it is not clear how distinctive cultural concepts fit it, it may be possible to decompose them into basic notions common to all language users.

Pinker and Nativism

Nativist theories of language all argue that our capacities to understand and produce language are innate, or built-in. Before the revival of nativism, behaviorism was the leading account of language and its development. Behaviorist theories explained language acquisition and development with a series of stimulus-response patterns ultimately resulting in a 'storage bin' theory—where children store phrases that they are exposed to in the environment and call upon them when the situation arises. This view's infrastructure was determined by principles like operant conditioning. A plausible example of the behaviorist model of language acquisition might look like this: a baby says "da da" in the presence of Daddy, and the parents show their approval. Gradually, parents make their approval contingent upon increasingly accurate and complex utterances.

For Pinker, human language is not learned but something that is a feature of our design just as much as our upright posture. He purports that "humans know how to talk more or less in the sense that spiders know how to spin webs" (Pinker, 18). Furthermore, his view of language in this way seeks to disabuse his readers of the notion that language is some kind of cultural invention. He wants us to think of language as another feature of our design that is complementary to our success and survival in our environment. In other words, bats use echo-location to help them navigate their environment and Pinker says that language is an evolutionary adaptation of this sort—"a biological adaptation to communicate information" (Pinker, 19). As such, it follows that this capacity would be qualitatively similar in any healthy human beings. The fact that we use language to communicate is no different than the idea that we use our legs to walk or that birds have wings for flying. Fundamentally, Pinker's nativism comes from a deeply found correlation between form and function.

Pinker's approach to language is heavily influenced by the work of the eminent linguist Noam Chomsky. Chomsky disputed behaviorist theories and spearheaded the revival of linguistic nativism by calling our attention to two fundamental facts about language: 1) we have an unlimited capacity to understand sentences in natural language—for in any language there is an arbitrarily large number of possible sentences; we are exposed to sentences that we have never heard before, but have no problem understanding and processing them. This forcefully suggests that language cannot be a repertoire of pre-packaged responses—the brain must have some mechanism to build an unlimited set of responses from a limited vocabulary. He called this Universal Grammar. 2) Children develop this grammar rapidly and without formal instruction while giving consistent interpretations of novel sentences that they never encountered.

Chomsky proposes a grammatical analysis of our understanding of language that purports to explain how it is that we understand sentences the way we do. Consider for example, the two phrases:

- 1) John is eager to please.
- 2) John is easy to please.

On the surface, the two sentences share the same structure consisting of a subject (John), predicate (is), modifier (eager/easy), and infinitive (to please). How do we know that their meanings are different? Chomsky suggested that their meanings are revealed by their deeper structures. In sentence 1, John is the subject. He is the one who pleases. In sentence 2, John is the object; others please him. As we can see, it would be very difficult for our parents to teach us such a distinction at 4 years of age. Natural languages have different surface structures but share the same deep structure. This may raise questions because not all natural languages have the same structure. Consider the following:

- 3) John hit Bill. (Bill is the one hit,
not the hitter)

In Japanese it would look something like this: John Bill hit. English and Japanese are examples of 'head-first' and 'head-last' languages respectively. In Japanese, the ordering is different but there is a way to disambiguate the agent of the action from the recipient of the action. In English, order matters, so we use ordering for disambiguating subjects from objects, but in many other languages order is less important; so there are other grammatical rules at work to help us make sense of sentences. And this is too hard to learn, so we do not learn it. This is where Pinker's nativism can help us make sense of such difficult phenomena, especially bearing in mind that children begin to master these ideas by the age of five or six years.

Challenges for Mentalese

One of the objectives in Pinker's introduction of Mentalese was to debunk the idea that people think in different languages. Pinker argues that Mentalese is the language of cognition, and also the 'translator' of mental events. To draw an analogy with a computer: Mentalese is our operating system working as deeply as the computational level which serves as the translating device for our (verbal) output monitors.

Nativism has enjoyed a large following, and, as we have seen, there is much empirical evidence in its favor from many fields. However, I see a need for some qualifications in the present conception of Mentalese with respect to bilingual speakers. If Mentalese is true, then it follows that concepts appearing in all languages must come from the same conceptual base. Along with my grandmother—an avid defender of the 'Portuguese sensibility'—I will suggest that this cannot be all there is to the story. I will look at some cases from bilingualism to see if such speakers seem to be drawing from separate conceptual bases or whether different languages have their foundations in one set of concepts.

All About Bilingualism/ tudo sobre bilinguismo

All along I have been talking about the difficulty of expressing cultural concepts to people that are not active members of that culture. Although this may say something about the expressiveness inherent in natural languages, it points only indirectly to the problem of mentalese.

It is obviously very difficult to have conversations about phenomenal properties of cultural concepts—especially when the parties involved are not members of the same culture. The problems presented by bilingualism are particularly interesting because they posit the problem

in a different light. They avoid problems of access to others' consciousness and address problems of Mentalese within the same person. This is where I find the real puzzle. It is all too easy to dismiss the questions I have raised by pointing out that interpersonal communication is complicated because it involves many complex processes—cultural experience, personal maturation, varying levels of eloquence in verbal behavior etc.

By positing the problem within the same person—a person like myself who is functionally fluent in more than one language—we can escape such a criticism.

With the concept of *saudade* then, it is clear that I know the concept for I grew up with it and use it in sentences without evoking faces of bewilderment from other Portuguese speakers. The problem is evident when I try to find an English cognate that explains the concept to *myself*. Somehow I lose something. I have to engage in a program of verbal acrobatics to even think about the concept in the right ways. (For one can *have saudades* or *feel saudades*) For an illustration of this please refer to Fig. 1 in the Appendix.

One popular analysis of bilingualism is that there are multiple conceptual bases from which bilingual speakers draw their concepts. In other words I would have one English-Mentalese track where my English verbal behavior happens and a Portuguese-Mentalese track where my Portuguese verbal behavior happens. This may explain why we have such hard time trying to convey such ideas cross-culturally. Linguists offer one way of understanding how this cross-linguistic capacity works through an explanation of the phenomenon they call code switching.

Code switching requires a high degree of proficiency in both languages. Code switching is the selection by bilinguals (or multilinguals) of forms from an embedded (L2) variety (or varieties) in utterances of a matrix (L1) variety during the same conversation. Code switching can be intersentential (from one language to the

other between sentences) or intrasentential (occurring within the same sentence or sentence fragment) "Code switching of languages offers bilinguals a way to increase their flexibility of expression going beyond the style-switching of monolinguals. That is, switching is a means to index the nuances of social relationships by exploiting the socio-psychological associations of the languages employed" (Myers-Scotton, 1992). Research suggests that there is this relationship between matrix and embedded languages. During the L2 acquisition the speaker will economize efforts by attaching the new embedded language concepts to concepts he/she already knows in the matrix language. Consider for example what would happen in a Spanish (ML) native during English (EL) acquisition: chair is linked to *silla*, water to *agua* and so on. For an illustration please refer to Fig. 2 in the Appendix.

This suggests that there are two parallel conceptual bases working at any time. The question that remains is: what happens when there is no arrow pointing from the L2 expression to something in L1? There is NOT a failure of understanding, so the concept HAS to come from somewhere. Two possibilities:

- 1) There is some more basic set of concepts found in Mentalese from which all of the concepts in L1 and L2 can be composed. This supports Mentalese.
- 2) There is an alternative set of concepts in L2 only acquired through learning L2—this suggests that Mentalese is false.

The way to determine which is true requires both making clear the logical form of the system of representation of Mentalese and testing it empirically by looking at cases of uniquely expressive phrases in other

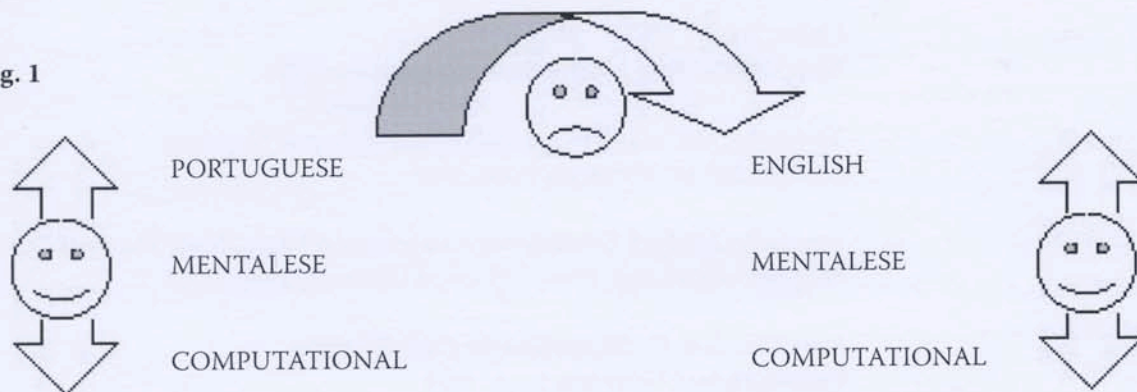
languages. In a summer project, in 2005, I pursued both of these avenues. For now, let me say that we may have to posit two parallel mentalese structures; Pinker mentions this: "it could be that English speakers think in some kind of simplified annotated quasi-English and that Apache speakers think in some kind of simplified and annotated quasi-Apache with the design I have just described"(Pinker, 82). If this is true, it seems to undermine mentalese.

Conclusion

I have pointed to some cases from bilingual experience that suggests a special expressiveness inherent in each language. I have also considered whether bilingualism operates on parallel conceptual bases or if it emerges from an even more basic combinatorial system. I have done this to point to the conceptual implications that bilingualism brings to theories of Mentalese; and as preliminary work to help frame questions that need to be addressed in an interdisciplinary exploration I engaged in last summer. Although bilingualism's place is not clear in the Mentalese thesis, nativism seems to give us strong reasons to accept it as true.

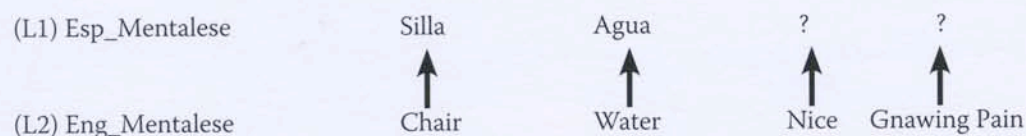
Appendix

Fig. 1



Note that there is no problem in the translation from the computational level to the natural language. The problem is evidenced in the attempt of cross-cultural translation.

Fig. 2



This suggests that there are two conceptual bases working at one time.

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